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A thing among things

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A THING AMONG THINGS

by

KELLI SHEA COUCH

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken, MFA

ABSTRACT

A thing among things is an endless pursuit to expand the definition of home and find resolve during life's circumstances. I constantly search for meaning within myself, my family, and our surroundings because one of my greatest fears is to live a purposeless life. Initially, I was allured by the false sense of control that photography provides as I guided individuals, directed scenes, and selected the framing. However, I realize that the medium has the potential to reveal accidental truths within the fantasies I create. The photographs are constructed and spontaneous. The stage is predetermined but any narrative can unfold. I'm obsessed with unplanned moments that allow me to see through the guilt and condemnation and feel at peace with who I am and never fully knowing what I'll be.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, Staged, Happenstance, Surrogate, Fantasy, Self-mythology

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KELLI SHEA COUCH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018

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KELLI SHEA COUCH

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DEDICATION

Gabriel and Shealyn, you are wonderful children and I'm honored to be your mom. Continue to find the magic in life and embrace your sense of wonder as you mature. Your opinions matter and your ideas are important; never forget that. You have inspired me to be a better artist and a better person. I love you with all my heart.

Raymond, you are supportive and loving in more ways than I could ever hope for. You stayed by my side through the heart ache, periods of doubt, and long nights of printing and installing. You journeyed with me through undergrad and graduate school, and you even adopted Gabriel and Shealyn along the way. Thank you for everything. I love you so much.

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Thank you Conne, Jill, Susan, and Nancy for pushing me as an artist and aiding in my development and growth. You reassured me during periods of doubt but consistently provided constructive criticism and guidance through the thesis process. I am honored to be surrounded by many intelligent, strong, and hardworking women. Thank you for teaching me to be assertive and unapologetic. Good or bad—I will carry all my graduate school experiences with me.

Thank you, Gabriel, Shealyn, Marina, Raymond and all my family members who have posed for me in a photograph. Your collaborations with me have been vital to my artistic process and my understanding of self. This experience has strengthened my love and admiration for each one of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	VII
INTRODUCTION: CHOOSING MY CONFESSIONS	1
1 LOSING MY RELIGION.....	2
2 THAT’S ME IN THE SPOTLIGHT.....	7
3 ALL THESE FANTASIES	16
4 I SET IT UP.....	24
CONCLUSION: NOW I’VE SAID...TOO MUCH	27
REFERENCES	28

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Kelli Shea Couch. She's Got Legs. "30 x 24". 2015.	3
Figure 2. Kelli Shea Couch. Sever. "30 x 24". 2015	4
Figure 3. Kelli Shea Couch. Lillian. "17 x 24". 2016	6
Figure 4. Kelli Shea Couch. Soap. "24 x 17". 2016	8
Figure 5. Kelli Shea Couch. I Wish I Was. "30 x 43". 2017	9
Figure 6. Tarsem Singh and R.E.M. <i>Losing My Religion</i> . Screenshot. 1992	10
Figure 7. Kelli Shea Couch. <i>Lucy in the Sky</i> . "43 x 30". 2018.....	12
Figure 8. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, <i>Romance (N.) from Ambrose Bierce # 3</i> , 1962.....	14
Figure 9. Kelli Shea Couch. Shark of Silence. "53 x 32". 2017	15
Figure 10. Kelli Shea Couch. Bad Touch. "17 x 24". 2018	17
Figure 11. Jan Svankmajer. Alice. Screenshot. 1988	18
Figure 12. Kelli Shea Couch. Footloose and Fancy Free. "30 x 43". 2017.....	19
Figure 13. Kelli Shea Couch. Lunar Landing. "24 x 17". 2016	20
Figure 14. Kelli Shea Couch. Spring Trap. "24 x 17". 2017	21
Figure 15. Kelli Shea Couch. Stuck on Me. "24 x 17". 2018.....	22
Figure 16. Kelli Shea Couch. <i>Big Toe</i> . "43 x 30". 2018.....	23
Figure 17. Kelli Shea Couch. Hypnotic. "17 x 24". 2018	24
Figure 18. Kelli Shea Couch. The Boogie. "17 x 24". 2018	25
Figure 19. Kelli Shea Couch. Installation Shot. Detail. 2018.....	26
Figure 20. Kelli Shea Couch. Installation Shot. Detail. 2018.....	26

INTRODUCTION: CHOOSING MY CONFESSIONS

My thesis exhibition *A thing among things* explores the psychology of the self and the tension between fantasy and reality by documenting my personal interventions of the environment around me to create a narrative of haunting wonder. I am interested in discovering truths about humanity and existence by blurring the lines between happenstance and interference.

Fantasy provides escapism from reality, but fiction also reveals truths about the self by allowing one to reflect on their own internal desires. Larry Sultan describes his photographic series *Pictures from Home* by stating, “The truth is about performance, how we perform, how we project. The truth can be staged and it can be found. I don’t think there is such a division between the two.”¹ Collaborating with subjects allows me to recreate my own truths while exploiting the perception that photography is a tool for documenting and recording reality. I am interested in creating a self-mythology by rediscovering the self through family members and objects around me.

A thing among things utilizes the camera’s ability to freeze a moment. Each photograph is a mini narrative suspended in time and space. While the moment ceases to exist, the memory is memorialized as an image. A photograph is akin to the self in that each picture is defined by the actions of the past, the reflections of the present, inevitably developing new meaning through the passage of time. A photograph often is the result of multiple attempts to reveal a truth; thus, my interventions extend past in-camera production as I sift through images and decide which moment defines the self I want to project and the reality that I want to acknowledge.

¹ “Larry Sultan discovers his family through photography.” Interview. *SFMOMA*. Accessed October 22, 2017. <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/larry-sultan-discovers-his-family-through-photography/>.

1 LOSING MY RELIGION

I stopped believing in god after dedicating nearly twenty-seven years of my life to being a Southern Baptist. I felt restricted by the demand for females to be subservient and selfless. I didn't agree with religious views on critical issues such as gay marriage, parental discipline and women's rights. I couldn't support a faith that was more about condemnation than acceptance. The schism from religion has been liberating but the separation has caused turmoil and overwhelming feelings of loneliness. I feel like nothing productive will come from telling my family that I am agnostic because they will tell me I'm going to Hell no matter how good of a person I may be. Photography facilitates means for articulating emotions that I cannot express verbally.

I began photographing my daughter and niece while they contorted their bodies and obstructed the sanctity of my grandmother-in-law's home in 2015. The house is adorned with glass figurines and antique furniture, providing hardly room to walk through the maze of collectables. The stifling environment became an ideal setting for my daughter Shealyn and my niece Marina to perform. As surrogates for the self, their bodies struggled within the domestic space, acting as metaphors for the anxiety that persists when one tries to feel at home with who they were and who they are becoming. *She's Got Legs* demonstrates the female form's struggle for stability as her legs teeter between subject and object. The twisted gestures of the gnarled feet are balanced with the delicate stability of her hand gripping the table.

I utilized a strobe while I photographed the girls performing inside the home. This artificial lighting allowed me to use a low ISO and a greater depth of field to capture details and gestures performed in low light situations with hyper real clarity, lending another level of artifice as it accentuated the faux flowers and kitsch decorations within the home. I'm interested in the tensions between comfort and anxiety. While these objects are supposed to provide coziness, the fakeness of everything intensifies the body's feelings of misplacement and it's failed attempt to firmly ground itself.



Figure 1. Kelli Shea Couch. *She's Got Legs*. "30 x 24". 2015.

Artmaking is an alluring form of self-expression because the artist maintains a sense of control over what is being created. However, the most intriguing and poignant work is often produced by chance. *Sever* is an important image because it shaped my perception of the camera's ability to independently see beyond my perceptions. The young girl sits on the couch agonizingly grasping her knees and turning her feet inward. The toes vanish and reappear as the black tips of the stockings recede into the shadows underneath the couch.



Figure 2. Kelli Shea Couch. *Sever*. "30 x 24". 2015

In *Photography and the Art of Chance* Robin Kelsey proclaims, “To attribute something to chance is to forfeit faith in an omnipotent and omnipresent creator. Chance is therefore associated with doubt, and with doubt about divine providence in particular.”² The vanishing toes were unintentional. Working with children requires compromise and it became evident that collaborating with the girls rather than directing them was a more rewarding experience as an artist and as a parent. Thus, the tension between the constructed and the accidental became an important concept in my artistic practice. Kelsey later states, “Initially secular thought removed the hand of God from ordinary events, while photography removed the hand of the artist from pictorial marking.”³ Photography grants me freedom of expression and teaches me to remain open to the world around me. Relinquishing full authorship over my images and freedom from the omniscient allows chance to create something better. Allowing the girls to resist my direction fashioned a truth for myself and the girls as well.

Departing from religion magnified feelings of loneliness and cynicism because there was a loss of self as well as a loss of community. Fellowship provided strength through hard times and reaffirmed that one did not have to struggle alone. Religious parables and secular folklore assign humanistic qualities to animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Virtues are encoded in everyday experiences and meaning is derived from fantastical encounters. Photographing humans, objects, animals, and environments engender kinship with my personal environments.

Animals and children are reminders of the burden of maturity, the obligations of domesticity, and the inevitability of growing up. *Lillian* is a portrait of my grandmother-in-law’s dog and a symbol for how I feel as I navigate through life. Lilly passed away two weeks after the photograph was made. She was a happy dog but severely overfed. She would constantly bark for attention when someone entered the

² Kelsey, Robin Earle. *Photography and the Art of Chance*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015. Accessed October 22, 2017. <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/>.

³ Kelsey Robin, 6.

house. The Chihuahua's pleas to be heard, as her tongue forever drooped from her mouth and her tiny legs carried her body, were enduring. Influential writer Angela Carter explains, "Animals often cannot behave well or badly. They can only behave the way they are. And we project upon them our negative perceptions of ourselves."⁴ My work seeks to humanize animals and objects and evoke admiration and understanding for beastly or childish behaviors. When I make a portrait with someone or something close to me, there is a deep connection as I try to convey the fortitude and idiosyncrasies that are identifiable to them, myself, and the world we inhabit.



Figure 3. Kelli Shea Couch. *Lillian*. "17 x 24". 2016

⁴ Carter, Angela, and Neil Jordan. "The Company of Wolves 17th October 1984." Interview. *Channel 4 Television*. Youtube.com. December 1, 2016. Accessed October 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EokEcGmWJ3U>.

2 THAT'S ME IN THE SPOTLIGHT

My older work explores the psychology of the self within the context of the domestic space but my thesis exhibition *A thing among things* expands the meaning of home beyond the confines of a house. My mother and father married multiple times resulting in a nomadic lifestyle for my siblings and me. The lack of stability and a confusing home life, coupled with a religion that emphasizes shame and guilt, molded a meek and fearful girl.

Soap is the first image created for *A thing among things* and I consistently refer to this image when I feel conflicted. The portrait is of my daughter during a bath that she and I shared one afternoon. She fluctuates between child and adult as she lathers soap across her hands. She adorns a punk rock aesthetic with a lip ring made of soap and slicked back hair. Simultaneously she alludes to a prophetic figure with her hands in a prayerful gesture suggesting cleanliness as a beautiful light illuminates her face.

Veronica Schanoes examines Luce Irigaray's essay *And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other*: "The mother's mirror is empty—she cannot see her own face—and when she gives that emptiness of self to her daughter, the daughter too becomes paralyzed."⁵ Irigaray understands the importance of mothers inheriting a clear sense of self. Shealyn is perseverance and with a strong presence she establishes her existence in the world. She and I are both the subject of this piece. *Soap* is a reminder that cycles can be broken and that a mother's quest for self-realization is vital to a child's wellbeing. Motherhood is not a sole incentive for making art. But I will not deny that being a parent is part of my understanding of self and a strong motivation for making art, pursuing higher education, and continuing to better myself internally.

⁵ Schanoes, Veronica. "Fearless Children and Fabulous Monsters Angela Carter, Lewis Carroll, and Beastly Girls.." *Marvels & Tales* 26, no. 1 (November 1, 2012): 30-34. Accessed October 24, 2017. Library Reference Center. 34.



Figure 4. Kelli Shea Couch. *Soap*. "24 x 17". 2016

Soap abandons the strobe light utilized in older work and employs the dramatic interplay between sunlight and shadow to discover theatricality and magic in the ordinary. The coexistence between ethereal

and corporeal interactions are reminders of the careful balance between ideology and reality. Removing artificial lighting creates more tension between truth and reality because the beautiful dramatic lighting is almost too supernatural to be perceived as real. The lighting exists first and I look for ways to intervene. Happenstance and deliberate artistic choices create a truth that is both staged and coincidental.

A thing among things was initially about recording light and shadow in the domestic space and exploring the interplay between the ethereal and the physical world. However, the work was becoming formulaic and the images were easily dismissed as beautiful photographs of kids in dramatic light and shadow. I spent some time in 2017 returning to artificial lighting in a controlled studio environment. None of these studies are part of my thesis exhibition but the work inspired me to think about the world as a backdrop. I realized that a sense of place and narrative are integral to my work. Frustrated, I once again returned to the photograph of my daughter for inspiration.



Figure 5. Kelli Shea Couch. *I Wish I Was*. "30 x 43". 2017

I took walks around our subdivision and noticed the happy clouds and the sunlight hitting the earth. Yellow weeds were growing in the yard and I thought about how grotesque I felt. So, I grabbed a Halloween costume out of the laundry room and set the hotdog in the middle of the beautiful weeds. I thought about images of beautiful women in fields of flowers looking longingly into the sky. I decided not to take myself seriously. I thought about failure and I thought about happiness. *I Wish I Was* is the embodiment of my attempts to be happy. While *A thing among things* photographically depicts a surreal environment in which everything is seemingly happy, dark undertones reside beneath the exterior of saturated color and beautiful lighting.



Figure 6. Tarsem Singh and R.E.M. *Losing My Religion*. Screenshot. 1992

Music has always been an integral part of my development as a person and I have always been inspired by the music and videos R.E.M. In an interview with *Rolling Stones Magazine* Tarsem Singh

describes his directorial inspiration for R.E.M.'s music video *Losing My Religion*, "And the place where the angel lands, it would look like Caravaggio, whose lighting I really like."⁶ I viewed the music video when I was young and the striking visuals, kitschy scenes, and dramatic lighting have continued to occupy my mind. Michael Stipe's erratic dancing and the contorting religious figures were an early introduction to the abject body and I identified with their struggle to belong. My sisters and I used to dance around the house like Michael Stipe much to my mother's dismay, flailing our arms and laughing. Tarsem combined his interests in painting with pop culture and created a unique music video that teetered between reality and dream-like sequences. My work is also influenced by religious paintings in which dramatic lighting enhances the theatricality and importance of a scene. My decision to use natural lighting signifies that the drama is preexisting.

Losing My Religion embraced the fantastical in search of an authenticity. J.R.R. Tolkien writes about the genre, "Fantasy, of course, starts out with an advantage: arresting strangeness. But that advantage has been turned against it, and has contributed to its disrepute. Many people dislike being arrested."⁷ Pausing and observing the exterior realm to understand internal struggles is a valuable process for understanding the self. *A thing among things* generates the same feelings of arrested strangeness. I'm not interested in conveying a direct message or overtly critiquing society. I'm more absorbed in capturing a feeling that anyone can potentially identify with while developing deeper connections with myself and the world.

⁶ Ducker, Eric. "The Making of R.E.M.'s 'Losing My Religion' Video." *Rolling Stone*. March 11, 2016. Accessed October 24, 2017. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/the-making-of-r-e-m-s-iconic-losing-my-religion-video-20160311>.

⁷ Boyer, Robert H., and Kenneth J. Zahorski. *Fantasists on fantasy: a collection of critical reflections*. New York: Avon Books, 1984. 79.



Figure 7. Kelli Shea Couch. *Lucy in the Sky*. “43 x 30”. 2018

Lucy in the Sky depicts my cat Lucy in front of a wall paper sky in the kitchen. I found poster-sized scrap book paper at Hobby Lobby, hung the cloudy sky on the wall, and watched as my cat went up to sniff the paper. I was inspired by R.E.M.’s music video and the studio work I made over the summer. I

wanted to bridge my interests in studio portraiture while capturing chance in a staged environment. Lucy is the only subject in my thesis work to address the gaze of the viewer, yet no clear meaning can be derived from her acknowledgement of others. Lucy's depiction refers to formal aesthetics of portrait painting. The conventional portrayal of Lucy is contrasted with the informal environment of my dirty kitchen floor. I joke with my family that Lucy is constantly judging us and I enjoyed giving her an omnipotent persona as she glares from the sky.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard worked in black and white but the surreal photographs of his kids and his interests in psychology mirror my own. Meatyard used masks to reveal truths about the figure underneath while the masks developed an agency and personality of their own. Christopher Meatyard speaks about his father, "My father was uncomfortable photographing people for a long time, but he began applying aspects of Zen that he used for landscapes—being aware of the moment, not bringing preconceptions into the work of art—to people."⁸ Meatyard blended the staged image with chance. He would choose a location, set up masks or dolls, and let figures come to life through masquerade.

His photographs capture surrealism and eeriness from ordinary circumstances. The figures are connected and consciously linked through the identity of the masks they wear. Meatyard writes, "I am the mask. In the final picture, as you might have partially noted, I am wearing Lucy-belle's mask and clothes and she is wearing mine."⁹ Meatyard didn't differentiate himself from the mask but saw himself as an extension of it. I feel this way when I take a photograph of people and objects. When I photograph family members, I realize that I am not them but through collaboration we become one another.

⁸ Grant, Annette. "The Photographer Who Masked His Subjects." *The New York Times*, December 5, 2004. Accessed October 26, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/05/arts/design/the-photographer-who-masked-his-subjects.html>.

⁹ Meatyard, Ralph Eugene, and Jonathan Williams. *The family album of Lucybelle Crater*. Millerton, New York: The Book Organization, 1974.73



Figure 8. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Romance (N.)* from *Ambrose Bierce # 3*, 1962

Shark of Silence is a collaboration between my daughter, husband, and me. Shealyn is inside the costume but my husband and I worked carefully to ensure that an interior figure could not be identified inside the costume. The sky was eerily beautiful at twilight and I wanted to create an image with drama and humor. I asked my daughter to walk slowly towards me and perform various gestures with her arms. The animation of the costume gave personality and feelings to the shark. Like the hotdog in *I Wish I Was*, the object becomes a subject and the object becomes a subject as it acts as an extension of the self. The shark reminds me of my attempts to be heard and the frustration of looking for deeper meaning and signaling for something that never comes. I think of the shark as internally screaming into a void. I've seen viewers laugh at the image and I don't mind. My despair is tragically funny.



Figure 9. Kelli Shea Couch. *Shark of Silence*. "53 x 32". 2017

3 ALL THESE FANTASIES

Neil Jordan directed the cinematic adaptation of Angela Carter's short story *The Company of Wolves*.

Jordan explains in an interview:

*The problem I found in watching the kind of films that Lucas and Spielberg have been making is that, you know, while they've grasped this kind of fairy tale sense of wonder, they've thrown their adult intelligence out the window. Do you know? And the attraction, for me, for The Company of Wolves is that on the one hand it was a fairy tale but, yet, there was this cleverly devilish and incredibly wicked intelligence behind the analysis of the fairytale.*¹⁰

Angela Carter's literary work and the film adaptation of *The Company of Wolves* are important influences on my artistic practice. The short story is a feminist reinterpretation of Charles Perrault's *Red Riding Hood*. Carter's adaptation, explores themes of sexuality through the mythology of the werewolf. *The Company of Wolves* uses symbolism, narrative, and color as allegories for the development of the self and analysis of the human psyche.

A thing among things, carefully employs color to convey moods and further emphasize the surreal fantasies existing within reality. The work is a loose narrative about the fantasies of adulthood and childhood, parenthood, and the attempt to discover one's self in a bizarre world. I wanted to incorporate more adult elements into my photographs because I want the work to speak on multiple levels. There's nothing wrong with making work about childhood or motherhood but I want *A thing among things* to speak about the psychology of the self and the encoding assigned to objects.

¹⁰ Carter, Angela, and Neil Jordan. "The Company of Wolves 17th October 1984." Interview. *Channel 4 Television*. Youtube.com. December 1, 2016. Accessed October 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EokEcGmWJ3U>.



Figure 10. Kelli Shea Couch. *Bad Touch*. “17 x 24”. 2018

Food is prevalent in fantasy and has a special association with women. I love the symbolisms of an apple because the fruit is always getting some woman in trouble. One morning my niece came over and she had an apple sliced in multiple directions with a rubber band holding the fragments in place. I thought the object was so beautiful and I wanted to photograph fragments of something being put back together to reassemble the whole. I went to the grocery store and found a beautiful, multi-colored apple with a peculiar looking stem. My niece cut the apple and I tried various ways of photographing it. I placed a piece of striped scrapbook paper on a wall to imitate wallpaper just as I did with *Lucy in the Sky*.

After many attempts, I was frustrated and asked my husband to move the apple. I photographed his hand as he was about to grab it and I was engulfed with the way his thumb rested right behind the stem. *Bad Apple* reminds me of my own sexuality and the idea of releasing my inhibitions and allowing myself to come undone. I like the idea of being disassembled and reconfigured repeatedly.

Jan Svankmajer is another influence on my artistic practice. Svankmajer's film *Alice*, like *The Company of Wolves*, is also an adaptation of a fairytale. The film utilizes live action and stop-motion animation to demonstrate differences in scale. Alice is represented by both a young girl and a porcelain doll. Svankmajer breathes life into inanimate objects and one of my favorite scenes consists of socks that burrow through holes in a hardwood floor as Alice tries to keep her socks on her feet.



Figure 11. Jan Svankmajer. *Alice*. Screenshot. 1988

Nina Auerbach describes Alice's journey, "Other littler girls travelling through fantastic countries, such as George Macdonald's Princess Irene and L. Frank Baum's Dorothy Gale, ask repeatedly 'where am I?' rather than 'who am I' Only Alice turns her eyes inward from the beginning, sensing that the mystery of her surroundings is the mystery of her identity."¹¹ *A thing among things* is dependent upon space for a narrative to unfold but the exact place is unimportant. Toys and clothing can be indicators of

¹¹ Auerbach, Nina. "Alice and Wonderland: A Curious Child." *Victorian Studies* 17(1973). 33.

time and plants can be geographical markers but I purposely leave out technology or information that causes the viewer to fixate on where and when instead of why or who. It's important to create a setting in which suspension of disbelief allows viewers to emotionally engage with the subjects of the photographs.



Figure 12. Kelli Shea Couch. *Footloose and Fancy Free*. "30 x 43". 2017

Footloose and Fancy Free is an homage to Jan Svankmajer's *Alice*. I noticed the beautiful yellow leaves falling on the green grass and the gnarled bark on the large tree trunk. Inspired by Svankmajer's film, I bought a pair of socks with a reptilian-like pattern. I stuffed the socks with filling and placed them next to the tree but the object didn't feel animated enough. When my son put the socks on with the stuffing still inside, I noticed how the elongated feet mimicked the gnarled tree. My most rewarding images result from collaboration between my children and I feel like it truly represents the mediation between child's play and adult interventions.

Both Angela Carter and Jan Svankmajer use fairy tales as a means of exploring adult themes that delve deep into the human psyche. Rather than withdraw from using archetypal protagonists and sinister monsters, they find ways to complicate them further. Many people think fantasy is childish but I admire learning more about myself through fictional characters. In my work, I find myself through animals, children, and cheap toys. I want to bring seriousness and an adult sensibility to objects and people who are easily dismissed or overlooked. Art questions cultural ideals and narratives that has been passed down through generations. Fairytales and chance allow artists to relinquish their god complex in favor of greater understanding.



Figure 13. Kelli Shea Couch. *Lunar Landing*. "24 x 17". 2016



Figure 14. Kelli Shea Couch. *Spring Trap*. “24 x 17”. 2017

In the introduction of *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* Angela Carter writes:

Ours is a highly-individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. ‘This is how I make potato soup.’¹²

¹² Carter, Angela, and Corinna Sargood. *The Virago book of Fairy Tales*. London: Virago, 1990.

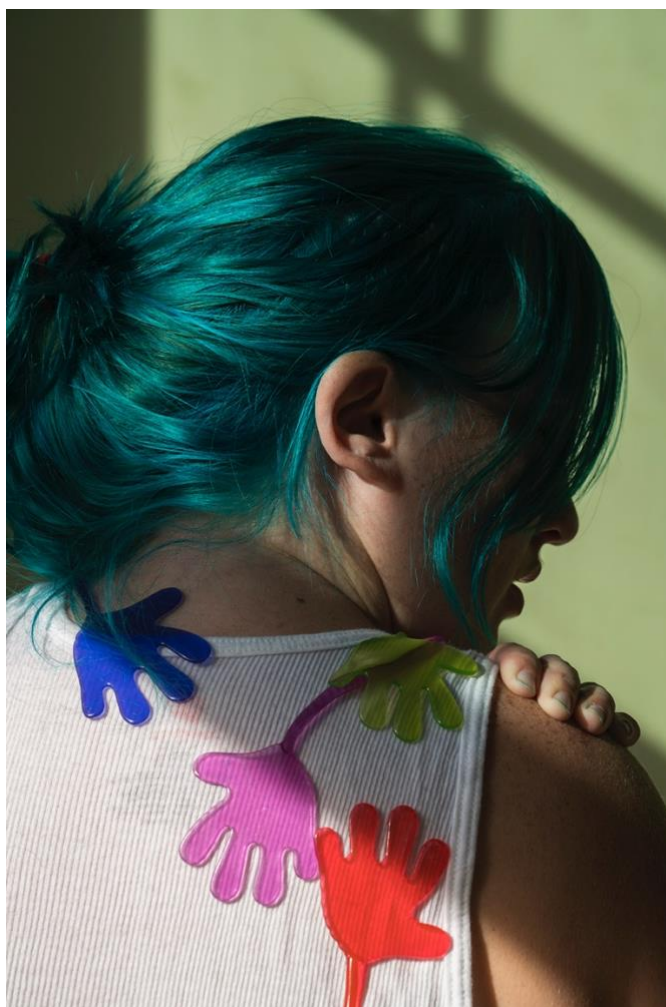


Figure 15. Kelli Shea Couch. *Stuck on Me*. "24 x 17". 2018

I consider my work to be autobiographical and a collaboration between me and the subjects in the photographs. I wanted to create a self-portrait in *A thing among us* to emphasize that the series is about an adult's interpretation of them self rather than a nostalgic look at childhood. I also wanted to provide my family with the opportunity to be behind the lens and in charge of the directorial process. I knew the object I wanted to interact with and chose a setting for the narrative to exist in but let my husband and kids position me within the frame and place objects on me. Relinquishing control allowed me to connect with my family at a different level and reminded me how vulnerable it can be to be the subject in front of a lens. It also reminded me that trust is an integral part of my process.



Figure 16. Kelli Shea Couch. *Big Toe*. "43 x 30". 2018

Artists have different reasons for making art. I feel compelled to make work that involves my family and friends because I enjoy understanding myself and society through them. I make photographs because it gives me a sense of control but it also reminds me to remain open to circumstance. The world is weird, gross, beautiful, funny, and upsetting. I want to feel everything and form opinions of my own accord. When I became a parent, I rediscovered parts of myself that I wished to recover. I regained my voice.

4 I SET IT UP

In earlier versions, I sequenced images based on color and size but this iteration felt superficial. I think about my work as an odyssey, a roller-coaster of feelings that are not easily navigated through. Therefore, narrative and emotion determined how the images would be curated in *A thing among things*. I've never been successful at creating diptychs so I used the exhibition as an opportunity to experiment with using the distance between images as an important tool for interpreting the work. *Hypnotic* and *The Boogie* were placed seven inches apart from one another in the gallery because the relationship between the two images complicated the story of the work. Each image subtly refers to the grotesque and when I placed them together I thought about death, corrosion, and surrealism. Another pairing was created on the opposite side of the gallery with *Lunar Landing* and *Spring Trap*. I was interested in how the pairing attempted to defy gravity and how the photographs monumentalize banal gestures.



Figure 17. Kelli Shea Couch. *Hypnotic*. "17 x 24". 2018



Figure 18. Kelli Shea Couch. *The Boogie*. "17 x 24". 2018

I used traditional methods of hanging work by displaying the center of the images fifty-eight inches from the floor. The simplicity of the installation permits viewers to focus on the imagery presented rather than emphasizing the way the work was hung. I chose to print some images larger than others but I only had three varying sizes for prints. Placing smaller images next to larger ones highlights the surrealism of the work. *Shark of Silence* is the largest print in the exhibition and the only photograph of its size. The image acts as a climax for the work and reiterates my feelings of being misunderstood as I'm trying to be heard.

Traditionally, I use white wood to frame my work but I wanted to experiment with new methods of framing. The natural cherry wood complimented the imagery aesthetically and conceptually. The wood brought out the warmth of the photographs and the frames emphasize the interplay between artifice and reality. The wood also made direct reference to domesticity instead of the galleries white walls.



Figure 19. Kelli Shea Couch. *Installation Shot. Detail.* 2018

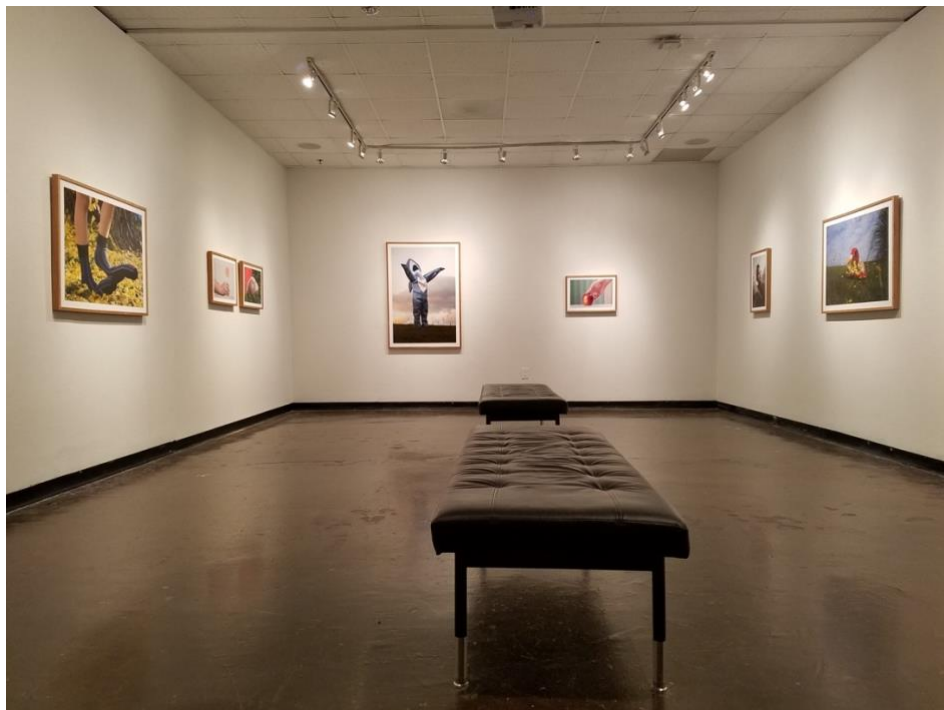


Figure 20. Kelli Shea Couch. *Installation Shot. Detail.* 2018

CONCLUSION: NOW I'VE SAID...TOO MUCH

A thing among things understands failure and the endless pursuit for self-realization. Identity is constantly evolving and we experience the death of multiple selves throughout life. Photography is a reminder of these deaths but also of the past's ability to haunt our future selves. No matter how we evolve, our history shapes who we are and who we will become. *A thing among things* employs fantasy to reveal truths about the human psyche. Understanding grants the ability to rewrite narratives, challenge the past, and inherit a new value system.

Throughout life I have struggled with assertion. *A thing among things* is the visual documentation of my attempts to proclaim myself and create a lasting physical impression. The discoveries made during my journey have made me a stronger artist, parent, and person. The betterment of myself is vital for my family but in the end this journey is a selfish endeavor, a selfishness that is long overdue.

A thing among things understands that a surrogate is just that, a symbol, a reference. Even my own body becomes the other through the lens of a camera. Roland Barthes explains, "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."¹³ Thus, I am also a surrogate. In my search to ascertain the self, I have come to something close. I am a thing among things.

¹³ Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*. NY, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982. 10.

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